Theodoric I

(c. 418 – c. June 451)

BRIEFING

Theodoric I (Gothic: Þiudarīks; Latin: Theodericus; c. 390 or 393 – 20 or 24 June 451) was the king of the Visigoths from 418 to 451. Theodoric is famous for his part in stopping Attila the Hun at the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains in 451, where he was killed.

EARLY CAREER

In 418 he succeeded King Wallia. The Romans had ordered King Wallia to move his people from Iberia to Gaul. As king, Theodoric completed the settlements of the Visigoths in Gallia Aquitania II, Novempopulana, and Gallia Narbonensis, and then used the declining power of the Roman Empire to extend his territory to the south.

After the death of Emperor Honorius and the usurpation of Joannes in 423, internal power struggles broke out in the Roman Empire. Theodoric used this situation and tried to capture the important road junction Arelate, but the magister militum Aëtius, who was assisted by the Huns, was able to save the city.

The Visigoths concluded a treaty and were given Gallic noblemen as hostages. The later Emperor Avitus visited Theodoric, lived at his court, and taught his sons.

GOTHIC REVOLT OF THEODORIC I

The Gothic revolt of Theodoric I was an uprising of the Gothic Foederati in Aquitaine (Western Roman Empire) during the regime of Emperor Valentinian III (425-455). That rebellion was led by Theodoric I, King of the Visigoths and took place in the South of France. The uprising took place between 425 and 426, in the period shortly after the death of usurpator John and was terminated by a military operation under the command of Aëtius.

Cause

The cause of the uprising must be sought on the one hand in the settlement of the Goths in Gallia Aquitania close to the Gallic capital Arles by Constantius III and was intended to keep an eye on the senatorial nobility. On the other hand, the political situation of the empire underpinned the insurrection.

After the Goths campaigned in Spain for the Romans in the period 416-418 (Gothic war in Spain), they were assigned a settlement area by Emperor Honorius in 418 in the province of Gallia Aquitania with Toulouse as their capital. Main reason for the settlement was that Constantius III, the architect of the settlement treaty, considered the Gallic senatorial class a greater danger to imperial power in Ravenna than the Gothic presence. In the previous period he should have campaigned against a series of usurpers (including Constantine and Jovinus) who received much support from the Gallic elite. With the settlement of the Goths as potential forces close to the center of Gaul, he hoped to better control the senators. Nevertheless, with the establishment of the Goths, Constantius had created a new power group that sought more influence within late Roman Gaul. They Goths were part of the Roman state system, acted within that state system and tried to exert pressure and control as much as possible from within.

With the death of Constantius III in 421 and of Honorius in 423, the Western Roman Empire ended up in a new crisis that would have major consequences for the relationship between imperial power and the army. Because the emperor was still a child, the western part of the empire was governed by mother Galla Placidia who was strongly under the influence of her generals. The Eastern Emperor Theodosius II (her cousin) also exerted great influence on her policies. There were several candidates who went to the position of commander-in-chief, which initiated a development that is described as the 'semi-privatization' of the Roman army. That situation made it possible for Theodoric I, the leader of the Gothic foederati, to realize his plans for more power. He emerged as an ambitious prince who acted in the same line as his infamous predecessors. The first signs of this ambition could already be seen during the Spanish campaign of 422 in which the Goths participated.

Sources

History is extremely sparsely narrated about the course of Gothic-Roman relations in the period between 418 and 439. There are a number of events in which the Goths were involved, but cause and effect are missing. The little that has been written down is by Prosper and Hydatius. From 422, the Goths turn out to be disappointing allies, but their presence proved sufficient to keep the Gallic nobility calm. The Goths, on the other hand, needed a series of imperial expeditions to be restrained. In 425 they marched to Arles, but were stopped by Aetius.

The first years of Theoderics' semi-autonomous reign went smoothly. In 418 he succeeded his father as king of the Visigoths in Aquitaine, who had died shortly before. After years of leading a wandering existence, the Goths were finally able to settle down. Under Roman rule they enjoyed many advantages, in return the Goths had to provide military assistance. These peaceful years came to an end with the death of the Western Roman fellow emperors Constantius III in 421.

The policies of the Western Roman Emperor Honorius had always relied heavily on the work of his brother-in-law Constantius, who had been appointed co-emperor seven months earlier. The disappearance of this mainstay mainly caused unrest within the army, with which Theoderic could take advantage. Two important generals Castinus and Bonefatius went to the army's supreme command, thus providing difficulties. Gothic Foederati accompanied them in 422 during a campaign against the Vandals in Baetica in southern Spain. According to chronicler Hydatius, the Goths worked militarily against the Romans and is said they caused the defeat for the Romans. Some historians assume that Theoderic withheld Castinus from the support of the Visigothic auxiliary troops, as a result of which he suffered a heavy defeat in the Battle of Tarraco in Baetica against Gunderic, the king of the Vandals who thus became the undisputed masters of Hispania. Probably Theodoric worked together with Boniface.

The uprising

With the death of Emperor Honorius in 423, a power struggle broke out in the Western Roman Empire that weakened the empire internally. The bulk of the army was in Italy and in Gaul the provincial prefect in Arles was killed during a revolt of his soldiers. In Italy, after Honortius' death, a new emperor emerged, John who had the support of the generals Castinus and Aetius. Now that most of the Roman army was staying elsewhere, Theodoric pushed aside Constantius' peace agreement and rebelled. Without encountering significant opposition, he took possession of all of Aquitaine and provided himself with access to the Mediterranean Sea. He then went up to the Arles to put pressure on the Romans. Some historians see this attempt as a declaration of loyalty to the Theodian dynasty in the hope that it would obtain a more favorable treaty.

In the summer of 425, John was overthrown by an Eastern Roman army, after which Valentinian III was installed as the new emperor. Three days after John was beheaded, Aetius arrived in Italy with a large army of Huns. Unaware of his execution, and after a brief skirmish with Aspar's army, Aëtius made peace. He accepted Valentinian III as emperor and was given the high position of praefectus praetorio per Gallia, entrusting him with the rule of Gaul and Spain. Aetius' appointment as chief executive in Gaul is seen as a maneuver by the new regime to keep a potential troublemakers away from the central government. The newly appointed prefect left Italy with the army he already had and reinforced with large numbers of Huns as mercenaries. Accompanied with this huge army made Aetius an end to the revolt of the Gothic foederati.

Aëtius arrived in the spring of 426 at Arles that was besieged by Theodoric. It seems that the Goths fled when they became aware of Aetius's army. No mention of a battle is made in the surviving sources. Nevertheless, some historians assume that near the city has been fought and the Goths were undermining here. The result of Aetius's arrival is undisputed, the Goths were forced to retreat to Aquitaine.

Aftermath

With the defeat against Aetius, the uprising came to an end. This was followed by peace talks in which the previously concluded treaty with the Romans was renewed, exchanging hostages back and forth. The later emperor Avitus was one of those hostages who stayed at the court of Theodoric. Here he met his sons and taught them.

With Aetius as Gallic prefect and from 429 as magister militum per Gallias, peace seems to have returned to southern France. The period after this until 435 passed without great incidents between the Visigoths and Romans. Nevertheless, Theodoric had not given up his quest for more power, because in 430 a Gothic army still marched to Arles to enforce more favorable conditions. This Gothic army was also defeated by Aetius, again not far from Arles. As far as is known, the Visigoths did not performed military duties in the Spanish provinces during this period.

Nevertheless, in 436 a large-scale conflict (the Gothic War of 436–439) arose between the Goths and Romans that was recorded as a bloody war. Because explanations for these hostilities are lacking, historians place these events in the great context of history.

Because the Romans had to fight against the Franks, who plundered Cologne and Trier in 435, and because of other events, Theodoric saw the chance to conquer Narbo Martius in 436 to obtain access to the Mediterranean Sea and the roads to the Pyrenees. But Litorius, with the aid of the Huns, prevented the capture of the city and drove the Visigoths back to their capital Tolosa. Theodoric's offer of peace was refused, but the king won the decisive battle at Tolosa, and Litorius soon died in Gothic imprisonment from his injuries. Avitus went – according to the orders of Aëtius – to Tolosa and offered a peace treaty which Theodoric accepted. Perhaps the Romans recognized at that time the sovereignty of the Visigoth state.

EXPANSION TO THE MEDITERRANEAN

The Gothic War (436–439) was a military conflict between the Gothic foederati and the Western Roman Empire, under Emperor Valentinian III. It occurred primarily in the Gallic provinces from 436 to 439. The key figures involved were the Gothic leader Theodoric I and the Roman army's commander-in-chief, Aetius. Contemporary sources characterize this conflict as a war. Additionally, there were uprisings of the Burgundians and the Bagaudae during the same period.

Sources

The origins of the Gothic War (436–439) and the specific engagements that occurred during its course are poorly documented. The absence of comprehensive records detailing the battles makes it challenging to reconstruct the war's progression. Our available knowledge is derived primarily from fragmentary accounts provided by chroniclers, supplemented by occasional references found in the works of poets, rhetoricians, and theologians. Prosper is the most significant primary source documenting the events, with additional insights provided by Hydatius and Sidonius Apollinaris.

Background

The Visigoths settled in Gallia Aquitaine as foederati after the Gothic War in Spain in 418. However, they proved to be unreliable between 418 and 435. In 426, a significant uprising against the Roman Empire occurred, which was quelled by military intervention led by Aetius. Furthermore, in 430, Aetius defeated a Gothic army.

As with the earlier rebellion of Theodoric I, the reason for this war is not clear from contemporary sources. Therefore, its origins must be inferred from the political situation of the Roman Empire at the time. The empire was relatively stable compared to the preceding decade, following the resolution of the Civil War between Bonifatius and Aetius, which concluded in favor of the latter. Consequently, Aetius became the most influential figure in the Western Empire from 433 to 450. He attained the rank of magnificus vir parens patriusque noster and assumed the role of 'protector' of the empress mother Galla Placidia and her young son Valentinian III.

However, new tensions arose with the emergence of formidable forces such as the Burgundian foederati under King Gunther, who wielded significant influence in eastern Gaul and posed a threat to Aetius. Furthermore, Theodoric I remained resolute in his quest for power, further complicating the political situation.

The Course of the War

In 436, while the Roman army was dealing with a Bagaudae uprising in Gallia Lugdunensis and a resurgence of Burgundian activity, Theodoric terminated the treaty with the Romans. According to Hughes, an alliance formed between the Goths and the Burgundians, prompted by Theodoric's dissatisfaction with Roman rule and his desire to expand into areas bordering the Mediterranean. Theodoric launched invasions into neighboring regions, prioritizing the capture of Narbonne, a key coastal city. His forces besieged the city, while also securing access to Spain by defeating garrisons stationed at the Pyrenean passes.

The Roman army took some time to mobilize against the Goths. Aetius, the commander-in-chief of the Western Roman army, was in Italy attending games held to celebrate his appointment as patrician. The simultaneous outbreak of the Gothic and Burgundian revolts compelled him to deploy the army efficiently. In Gaul, he only had the Comitatenses field army at his disposal. General Litorius had already been sent to suppress the Bagaudae insurgents with a part of this force. Aetius, who had established a delicate peace throughout his vast empire, was reluctant to lead the Goths with units from other regions, as he feared it would leave those areas vulnerable. Instead, he sent a delegation to the court of the Hun King Rua, requesting military assistance. Although the timing is uncertain, it is highly likely that in 436–437, the Huns were granted parts of Pannonia near the River Save.

Prior to the arrival of this army in Gaul, Aetius utilized the available forces to suppress the combined Gothic and Burgundian uprising.

In 436, General Litorius successfully suppressed the Bacaudian uprising in Armorica. He then led his army southward and, in 437, joined forces with a contingent of Huns to quell the Gothic revolt.

Litorius focused his efforts on Narbonne, which was under siege by the Goths. However, upon the arrival of the Roman forces, the Goths retreated, leaving the city relieved. Subsequently, Litorius engaged the Goths in Aquitaine, shifting the conflict to the heartland of Gothic territory. Theodoric's army found itself progressively pushed into a defensive position, eventually retreating to its stronghold in the capital, Toulouse, which came under siege by the Romans. Following a prolonged siege, Theodoric eventually surrendered to General Litorius.

The Siege of Narbonne

The siege of Narbonne was a conflict between the Visigothic Foederati of Aquitania and the Western Roman Empire.

The siege began in late 436 and carried over into 437, when the Roman Magister Militum Litorius arrived with a force of Huns and the Gallic Field Army. Litorius surprised the Visigoths and routed their army before they could draw up a coherent battle line. Prosper of Aquitaine records that to alleviate the starvation of the city, each soldier in Litorius' army was ordered to carry two measures of wheat for the citizens of Narbonne.

Theodoric was forced to lay down his arms and honor the treaty with the Romans, which obligated him to provide troops to the Roman army in the event of a setback against the Suebi in Spain in 438. Despite the reconciliation between the Goths and Romans, hostilities resumed. Historians speculate that developments in Spain and the Mediterranean, where the Vandals were increasingly engaged in piracy, contributed to this resurgence of conflict. Sources indicate a renewed large-scale war that initially challenged the Goths.

Upon Aetius's return to Ravenna following the marriage of Valentinian III and Licinia Eudoxia in Constantinople in early 438, he made changes to the command structure of the army in Gaul. Avitus, likely serving as magister militum per Gallias, assumed the role of praefectus praetorio Galliarum, with Litorius succeeding him. Aetius himself temporarily assumed supreme command and actively participated in the war effort.

One of the few notable achievements documented regarding Aëtius' involvement recounts a significant victory he achieved in a pivotal battle, during which he purportedly vanquished 8,000 Goths.

Given the political exigencies in Ravenna, Aëtius found it necessary to entrust the continuation of the Gothic war to Litorius after this engagement. In recognition of his efforts, the emperor commissioned the erection of a statue in his honor, with Merobaudes delivering laudatory remarks. Presumably, Aëtius possessed ample confidence in the strategic acumen of his generals, Litorius and Sigisvult, particularly considering the substantial setback the Goths had previously suffered.

The Battle of Mons Colubrarius

The Battle of Mons Colubrarius was a battle in the Gothic War from 436 to 439. It was one of the many armed conflicts between the Gothic people and the Western Roman Empire during the first half of the fifth century. The main protagonists in the war were the Visigothic king Theodoric I and the commander-in-chief of the Western army General Aetius. The battle probably was fought near the French village Olonzac around 438.

In the Gothic war that erupted in 436, the Goths initially had a predominance, but were forced to lay down their arms as a result of the successful offensive of the Romans under the leadership of Litorius in 437. The opponents made peace that, however, was short-lived, because the following year the war broke out again in all intensity. Also this time the Goths were the instigators and lay domestic problems in Spain and piracy in the Mediterranean underlied this. The Romans made preparations for a new campaign and on this occasion Aetius personally took command.

The Battle of Mons Colubrarius is known from only one source. The Roman poet Merobaudes refers to it in his Panegyric in honor of Emperor Valentinian III and his commander-in-chief Aetius:

> *«All the forces of the Goths... had set out with their king to destroy Roman territory... On the mountain that the Ancients call... Snake mountain [Mons Colubrarius]... he surprised as is his custom and killed most of the enemy; Once the infantry units, which were very numerous, had fled, he himself pursued the spreading cavalry troops and overwhelmed those who stood steadfast with his army, and those who fled with his eager speed. Shortly afterwards, the king appeared on stage with his remaining troops and was stunned to see all the trampled bodies... [here the text ends].« Merobaudes, Panegyric 1, fragment IIA, 10f*

This hymn was pronounced in 438 by Merobaudes at the festive unveiling of a statue of the general commissioned by the emperor. According to historians like Ian Hughes, the battle to which the court poet refers in his poem must have taken place in the Gothic War of 436–439. Aetius was honored on that occasion for his victory over the Goths.

From the hymn it can be said that Aetius did not achieve his victory after a conventional battle. There were no two armies facing each other here prior to the battle. Aetius surprised the Goths when their captain Theodoric was absent with part of his army.

Aetius achieved an important victory, because reportedly he slaughtered 8,000 Goths on the battlefield.[5] Although the extent of the victory and the number of losses suffered by the Goths are undoubtedly exaggerated by Merobaudes – since this was a hymn – it seems that Theodorik had to take a major setback. However, the defeat was not final, as the Gothic king refused to capitulate and after that the war continued until 439.

It is not certain exactly where the battle took place. Nevertheless, there is a good theory where the Mons Colubrarius, which means Snake Mountain, is located. Near the French village of Olonzac, south of Gaul, lies a small hill called de Roc de la Garde Roland. From a 12th-century manuscript, it is told of a battle that took place here at the time of Charles the Great, about three centuries after the Gothic War of 436–439. A companion of Charlemagne, Bishop Turpin, questions a Saracen in the manuscript after the battle, who tells him that his house is at Petra Colobram, and that that hill would later be named Roc de la Garde Roland. In addition to the fact that the text thus seems to confirm this place as the location of the battle, the location lends itself well to a fight.

The Battle of Toulouse

In 439, the Visigoths were forced to retreat to their capital, Toulouse, due to increasing defensive pressure from the Romans. The Roman army, led by General Litorius, besieged Toulouse. King Theodoric I of the Visigoths attempted to attack the Roman camp during the siege but failed, resulting in heavy losses for his army. According to Prosper, "due to the thoughtfulness of the Romans, the opportunities turned and the Goths became the parent party." Additionally, after the failed attack, General Litorius was captured by the Goths and executed.

In the midst of the ensuing chaos, Vetericus, a Goth serving in the Roman army, temporarily assumed leadership. Prosper briefly states, "in the same period Vetericus was considered loyal to our state and known for the frequent demonstration of his skill in war". Vetericus successfully stabilized the situation following Theodoric's disastrous attempt. Subsequent battles occurred, and the Romans dispatched new troops, mainly consisting of auxiliary forces from the Huns, to confront the Goths.

The Battle of Toulouse was fought between the Visigoths and the Western Roman Empire in 439. Having previously defeated the Visigoths at Narbonne, the Roman general Litorius led his largely Hunnic army against Toulouse, the capital of the Visigothic Kingdom. During the siege, the Visigothic king Theodoric I attacked the Roman camp and inflicted heavy casualties. Litorius was captured and executed. Since the Visigoths also suffered heavy losses, Theodoric made peace with the Roman governor Avitus.

End of the War and Consequences

In response to the emergent situation, Aetius took command of the Gallic army. In 439, Aetius traveled southward to end the conflict. Aetius aimed to conclude the war with a significant triumph, boosting morale in the West and thwarting further Gothic expansionist endeavors. He hastened towards Toulouse and initiated the siege of a Gothic military encampment near their capital. After a short break to build siege towers, Theodoric's forces breached the camp's defenses and overwhelmed its defenders, leaving them with no escape. Ultimately, the Romans emerged victorious, and the Visigoths suffered significant losses. Aetius was forced to make peace with the Visigoths, because he had to deploy part of his troops against the Vandals in the Vandal War, who had meanwhile taken Carthago.

The peace talks with Goths were conducted by the praetorian prefect Eparchius Avitus. According to Sidonius Apollinaris, it was largely thanks to his commitment that Theodoric made peace. The peace was in a way unsatisfactory for the Romans, because the victory was not complete and the Roman army had also come out of the battle battered. Probably some of the peace conditions held the departure from Aquitaine of the Alans, who had previously abandoned the Visigoths. Hydatius and Prosper date this peace in 439. The exact date would probably have been late in 439 or early 440, because it is known that Aetius returned to Italy in 440.

The Roman victory assured future Gothic submission for more than twenty years. Apart from a brief interlude under Thorismund, the Goths were loyal allies of the imperial government.

CONFLICT WITH VANDALS

A daughter of Theodoric had been married (in 429?) to Huneric, a son of the Vandal ruler Geiseric, but Huneric later had ambitions to wed Eudocia, a daughter of the Emperor Valentinian III. He therefore accused Theodoric's daughter of planning to kill him, and in 444 had her mutilated - her ears and nose cut off - and sent back to her father, which earned the enmity of the Visigoths.

In 444, the former magister militum Sebastianus, son-in-law of Bonifatius, fled to Tolosa seeking refuge after exhausting his welcome in Constantinople, where he had been living in exile since Bonifatius's death. This could have strained relations with Aëtius, but Theodoric did not permit Sebastianus to stay in Toulouse. Sebastianus then fled to Barcelona, where he was also rebuffed, before finally seeking asylum in Africa. Unfortunately for Sebastianus, Geiseric seems to have been no happier to welcome Sebastianus than Theodoric, and had Sebastianus executed shortly after his arrival.

Theodoric was also an enemy of the Suevic king Rechila in Iberia, because Visigoth troops assisted the imperial commander Vitus in his campaign against the Suevi in 446. But the ability of this people to conduct a strong defence and the better relations between Geiseric and the Roman Empire led Theodoric to change his foreign policy. He therefore, in February 449, married one of his daughters to the new Suevic king Rechiar, who visited his father-in-law at Tolosa in July 449. On his return – according to the author Isidore of Seville - Rechiar, with the assistance of Visigoth troops, devastated the area surrounding the city of Caesaraugusta and managed by guile to take Ilerda.

Some recent scholars doubt that Theodoric issued legislation, as it was assumed in earlier times.

ALLIANCE AGAINST THE HUNS

When Attila the Hun finally invaded Gaul, Avitus arranged an alliance between Theodoric and his long-standing enemy Aëtius against the Huns. Theodoric joined this coalition because he recognized the danger of the Huns to his own realm. With his whole army and his sons, Thorismund and Theodoric, he joined Aëtius.

The Visigoth and Roman troops then saved the civitas Aurelianorum and forced Attila to withdraw (June 451).

BATTLE OF THE CATALAUNIAN PLAINS

Aëtius and Theodoric followed the Huns and fought against them at the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains near Troyes in or about June 451. Most Visigoths fought at the right wing under the command of Theodoric but a smaller force fought at the left under the command of Thorismund.

Theodoric's forces contributed decisively to the victory of the Romans, but he himself was killed during the battle. Jordanes records two different accounts of his death: one was that Theodoric was thrown from his horse and trampled to death; the second was that Theodoric was slain by the spear of the Ostrogoth Andag, who was the father of Jordanes's patron Gunthigis.

The body of Theodoric wasn't found until the next day. According to Gothic tradition he was mourned and buried by his warriors on the battlefield. Immediately, Thorismund was elected as successor of his father.

POWER STRUGGLES AMONG THEODORIC I'S SONS

After Theodoric I's death, his sons ruled the Visigoths in succession, murdering one another by turns. Thorismund ruled from Theodoric's death until 453, when he was murdered by his brother Theodoric II. Theodoric II ruled from 453 until 466, when he was murdered by his younger brother Euric. Another brother, Frederic, had died in battle during Theodoric II's reign. Euric ruled the Visigoths from 466 until his death by natural causes in 484. Theodoric's two other sons, Retimer and Himnerith, did not serve as Visigothic kings; after Euric's death, power passed to his son, Alaric II.

According to Sidonius Apollinaris (who spent time at Theodoric II's court), Theodoric II was a grandson of Alaric I, the first King of the Visigoths. This is consistent with Theodoric II's son being called Alaric II, as this would make him the great-grandson of Alaric I. The general consensus is that Theodoric I's wife must have been a daughter of Alaric, as there are no contemporary accounts claiming that Theodoric himself was Alaric's son.

LEGACY

For his sacrifice and subsequent victory over Attila at the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains, Theodoric became a revered figure in Western historiography, and served as an inspiration for J. R. R. Tolkien in his creation of king Théoden of Rohan in The Lord of the Rings and The Battle of the Pelennor Fields.